

"Impossible! What sort of creatures would they be, that could live two miles beneath the surface of the earth? Surely, Asher, you are joking!"

R. Briggs Johns, mighty power back of Stan-America Oil Corporation, looked at Blaine Asher closely, expecting to see the chief geologist and scientist of the company laugh. But Blaine Asher did not laugh. Serious, his rather thin face grave as he leaned his tall, muscular body above a torsion machine he was adjusting, there was nothing to indicate he had the faintest idea of a joke.

"Why damn it, Asher!" Johns insisted wrathfully, "you don't really mean that. And"—he took a nervous turn around the laboratory—"if such a wild thing were possible, what has that to do with our trouble? You haven't led me on to spend a million dollars drilling a thirty-six-inch hole, just so you could test a fantastic theory?"

"You know better than that." Asher wiped his hands and leaned against a table. Johns, looking into the

cool gray eyes of the man before him, did know better. Blaine Asher was more than just a geologist or scientist. Well he might be termed a master geo-metallurgist. Johns nodded, wiping beads of perspiration from his brow.

"You say impossible—and want to know how those creatures cause this field, the largest oil field in the world, to start going bone dry over night. All right:

"Remember how you laughed when I told you that oil would some day be mined instead of pumped or flowed from the earth? You couldn't see how one central shaft could be sunk, then tunnels run back underneath the oil strata, tapping the sand from the bottom and letting the oil run down to be pumped out one shaft. Yet, that way, we would get *all* the oil, instead of the possible one-eighth of the total amount as we get by present methods.

"Now, you have seen that done. And you said that was impossible."

"Yes," Johns objected, "but those test wells we mined

were only a few hundred feet deep. Wells in this field are eight thousand feet deep! Think of the heat, man! You can't do it. And as for people—"

"Your great field has suddenly gone dry, almost in a month's time," Asher stopped him. "What is happening here can happen elsewhere. Only, formations in this field are more suited to there being life—or something—below us. Stan-America is going broke. Many others have already gone broke. Still, that oil couldn't have gotten away.

"As for heat—yes, we know that oil is hot when it comes up from the oil sand at eight thousand feet, or from ordinary wells at three to six thousand feet. But"—Asher lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply—"gas coming out of the same well is *cold*! So cold it forms frost inches thick on pipes and tanks.

"Rock pressure—the pressure of the earth—forcing up the gas, causes that. Why couldn't that same pressure cool great caverns below the granite cap below the oil sands? It could. For that matter, I know that same pressure will generate useful power. I'll show you that

in a minute."

"All right!" Johns chewed his cigar almost savagely. "Say, then, that you can work down there, nearly two miles underground; granted that we can tunnel from beneath the sands and pump more oil from one central shaft than we now do from fifty wells—what has that to do with this tosh about a race of people?"

"They are not people, perhaps." Asher grinned at the "there, I've stuck you!" look on Johns' face. "Let's say, rather, creatures. Have you ever met Lee Wong, the great Chinese scientist, or his Russian geological collaborator, Krenski? No?

"Well, I have. I met them in Paris in 1935—five years ago. They're brilliant men, and they've prepared some wonderful papers. Brilliant, I said: they are also dangerous. They claim, you know, that the fossils we now drill up come from a lost race—people who went *into* the earth while man, like us, was coming up onto the earth from the water. Some claim those fossils have been on the surface at one time, and were silted over. But eight thousand feet is a lot of silt, Johns:

ever thought of that?"

"Good God!" Johns gasped hoarsely. "You almost make me believe you are right. But, supposing there is such a race of things—what will you do?"

"This." Asher drew back a curtain that was stretched across one end of the laboratory. "You know I was working on a cage in which to descend into that eight-thousand-foot well you've drilled—the well you're going to use to try and find why this field is suddenly gone dry. This it it."

Johns stared, shook his head wonderingly and stared again. Before him, ready to be transported to the well that was larger than any ever drilled before, stood what Blaine Asher called his Miner, for want of a better name.

A thick steel tube, it was. Twelve feet long and large enough around that a man might stand inside of it. The top was welded on in much the manner a top is welded on an ordinary hot-water heater, and had connections for hose in it. At the height of a man's

eyes heavy windows were set in, and in one side was a door just large enough to admit a man's body. This door sealed tight the minute it closed.

"It looks like—like some sort of a deep sea diving outfit," Johns said as he walked around the braces that held the Miner upright. "But all those gadgets inside and on the bottom—?" He indicated the strange instruments that could be seen when the door was opened, and the queer glass tubes that projected from the very bottom.

"Pressure-power units—my own invention," Asher told him. "For ten years I've been working on this. I knew that some day I would want to explore the oil caverns beneath the earth, so I made ready.

"As I told you, rock pressure, or earth pressure, is a tremendous thing. It is power, so I figured how to use it. Under artificial pressure, I have tried out my Miner and its equipment.

"Those tubes sticking from the bottom contain something you are familiar with: non-burning and

non-explosive helium gas. I have discovered a way, by their use, to create power that will melt away rock or iron—literally dissolve it into nothing! Not in an hour, or minutes. In seconds, Johns!

"The pressure of the earth acts as my generator. The pressure action on the filaments of platinum, and several compositions I have no time to explain now, causes heat. Call it friction of compressed air, if you wish. As neon gases carry an electric spark, so does this helium carry the power generated by earth pressure. The pressure below earth acts on the delicate coils and points of my generator. This bit of power is carried into the helium tubes, and by a system of vacuum power, is increased millions of times. Thus, the tiny spark of a cigar lighter would electrocute a hundred men!"

"I—you mean somewhat like a violet ray is increased in the lightning tubes?" Johns strove to grasp the foundation of the thing.

"Yes, the foundation of it all—with the earth's pressure the power motive," Asher nodded. "So, after

my Miner is on the bottom of our well, I can burn—or dissolve—a room as large as this laboratory in a few minutes. The whole thing is no mystery after you learn it—not nearly so much as radium, or radio, was. Merely creating a spark of electricity and fanning it through a vacuum and a conductor of massed gases."

"But"—Johns had unconsciously dropped his voice to a whisper—"what of these strange creatures? How would you deal with them? Damn it, Asher, I think I'm beginning to believe this nutty idea of yours. Any man who can generate power with the pressure of air as it is packed by earth must know what he is talking about!"

"I have but one protection against anything down there that tries to harm me," Asher said simply. "That is this—see?"

What he held up looked like an old-fashioned six shooter. It was fitted with a platinum-sealed box in the place where a cylinder would have been. The barrel looked like some queer, blue glass.

"Do you see that test tube?" Asher pointed to a glass tube on a table a few feet away. "Now watch."

He pressed a tiny ratchet under his thumb. A snapping, buzzing noise filled the laboratory. Johns gave an exclamation of wonder and awe. Quickly, the test tube started to melt into a pool of molten glass. Asher increased the pressure of his ratchet trigger. The tube was knocked to the floor.

"Static electricity—always some form of electricity," said Asher grinning at the astonished oil baron. "Conductor coils here," he continued as he tapped the sealed cylinder, "are charged much as a flash-lamp battery. The charged conductors attract the static electricity of the air, and, in a manner similar to the action of the power generator, increase power. There is a slight difference: by turning quick power on my static gun, I can cause the charge to knock down and merely electrocute, as I knocked the half-melted tube from the table."

"I can understand that, a little," Johns sighed profoundly. "It's the same juice that causes a gasoline

truck to catch fire if you don't have a ground chain on it somewhere. But, just the same, I claim it's remarkable."

"Not half as remarkable as what I expect to find two miles down when I descend to-morrow." Asher had a dreamy look in his eyes. "I wonder: new ways to get petroleum wealth ... a strange people...."

"Men,"—Asher, a tight-fitting asbestos composition suit covering him from foot to neck, spoke tersely—"when you get me on bottom, stop every bit of machinery, and don't dare pull up until I give the signal. If I'm down there the entire day, all right. But"—he smiled, trying to make light of the danger—"if I don't signal within thirty-six hours, pull up anyhow."

From the bull-wheels of the drilling rig Asher spooled out some of the air-hose cable through which air blown over ice would be pumped into the Miner; then when the long steel cylinder was over the hole and ready, he turned to the company officials and government scientists and engineers around him in

the boarded-up derrick.

"Possibly I can get a survey in an hour. Perhaps I'll have to come back to the surface and make adjustments to my equipment. That remains to be seen.... Now, let's get low."

He adjusted a helmet over his head. It looked much like the helmet worn by a sea diver, except that it had no connecting hose for air. The windows in the helmet, which contained pressure lights, worked on the same principle as the disintegrating rays of the Miner. When Asher turned the ratchet that set the little pressure machine into motion, a violet tinged green ray of great lighting power shot out and increased, by weight of air, or atmosphere beneath the earth, the power of one tiny spark a million times.

Without ceremony or farewell, Asher crawled inside his tube. The door was closed and he fastened it from inside. For a moment, wild panic assailed him. But he fought it off, becoming again less the feeling human and more the cold calculator of advanced science. The light from outside, coming in through the windows of

the Miner, was shut off. The long steel cage clanked against the sides of the special casing in the well, and Blaine Asher was on his trip into a lower world never before visited by man.

That was what Asher believed. But, had he known what waited for him, two miles into the bowels of the earth....

At five hundred feet, the descent stopped, giving him time to adjust himself to the pressure change. The gas and oil had been eased out of the hole. That is, the casing had been run on through the producing strata, shutting it off. Asher signaled by buzzer, and a stream of the ice-washed air flowed down to him.

Three thousand feet! Six thousand feet! More than a mile down! Sweat poured from his body in streams, and the air coming into the Miner through the hose did not relieve him. It was hot—almost unbearably so. His ears were roaring. The dark of his tube was relieved as he turned on his pressure lamps. He adjusted the pressure discs over his ears by twisting a thumbscrew on his helmet, and the pounding of his

ear-drums ceased.

Gasping, he watched the depth meter in front of him. It did not seem as if he was moving, but the indicator now showed more than seven thousand feet. It moved around slowly and more slowly; trembled at eight thousand—and stopped.

Like the snapping of a man's fingers, the temperature inside the Miner changed. Asher was now fifty feet below the bottom of the oil and gas sands, and if his theory about rock pressure worked.... It *was* working. Frost was forming on the inside of the Miner!

"I'm right—right—right!" Asher thought, elated, sending his buzzer signal up to those so far above. The icy air through his hose changed to air of normal temperature. He signaled for slack in the lowering cable, then prepared for the greatest test of all.

Cramped, with hardly room to move, he studied his gages. Helium tubes at the proper pressure for compressing the tiny spark of the pressure generator, so it would flare a million times stronger under the

action of the vacuum tubes: diamond and cut-glass tubes in the bottom of the Miner, thermoed with layers of quicksilver: everything cleared, everything ready.

His hand shaking, Asher pushed the tiny switch that brought his filament points trembling together under the atmospheric pressure so far underground. A tiny spark danced and throbbed through the tiny glass tube before him, beginning to buzz as it started the circuit of increasing coils, and soon humming and vibrating as the helium and vacuum tubes swelled it to full power. Spark after spark, increased almost beyond imagination, followed one after another. The Miner throbbed and shook.

White-faced, Asher touched the little lever that opened the blasting outlets in the bottom. Almost instantly the Miner dropped a full six inches—went on, down to a foot. Asher, pride of success choking him, pulled the lever hard over, which brought some of the tubes beneath him spreading out, to blast away the earth on each side of him.

He signaled for more and more slack as the depth indicator showed he had burned, or disintegrated, his way down to thirty feet beyond the original bottom of the hole. He was below the bottom of the protecting wall of casing now—at the mercy of the pressure of two miles of earth.

Slowly, setting all his bottom tubes to cutting away on all sides of him, he started hollowing out enough room to step out into. His lights, when he looked through the windows, showed ghostly on earth ten feet on each side of him. Ten more minutes and he had created a room nearly twenty-five feet square—a man-made cave, two miles below the surface.

There was something akin to awe in the feelings of Asher when he opened the little door, crawled out and stood erect. The pressure lamps in his helmet lit up the room he had made. There were no sounds, just a vague, ringing silence.

Then so quickly that it robbed him of his senses, two things happened. A hundred yards away from the well in which he had descended, another well, drilled by

another oil company, was shot. Three hundred quarts of nitro-glycerine were set off in the hole.

Asher screamed and clamped his ear discs down tight. It seemed the very gods of thunder were shrieking and raging in his head; every nerve and fiber in his body throbbed and tingled with the hellish vibration.

On his knees, where the shock had thrown him, in darkness beyond description, Asher realized the lights from the Miner no longer shone out. Frantically, he adjusted the small lights in his helmet and got them to sending off their rays again. Then, an icy hand seemed to squeeze his heart, turning his blood to ice-water in his veins. He cursed himself for not foreseeing that some company might shoot a well close by, while he was underground.

He turned. The Miner was all right, but Blaine Asher was trapped! For the walls of the hole below the bottom of the casing had caved. Thirty feet of rock, sand and conglomerate matter were between him and the bottom of the pipe.

He was trapped—two miles below the earth. There was no hope of rescue, the hope that miners feel in deep shafts. There could be no rescue for Asher. No one could get to him. He cried out his horror, fighting to keep from swooning.

The helmet hampered him. He turned on a small pressure lamp attached to the belt at his waist, and chanced taking the helmet off. Dank and nauseous was the air that he breathed, since it no longer came through the filters in his helmet. But it was air that would serve, nevertheless.

A crackling, rumbling sound caused him to turn quickly. Eyes wide, he stared at the long crack that was opening before him.

Asher was between two layers of granite—one layer under him, and another above him, just below the oil sands. Now, as the crack between these two layers widened, he could see it slope downward until it ended in a great cavern that stretched endlessly away beyond the beams of his light.

It wasn't this crack that caused Blaine Asher, an iron-hearted man of science, to choke and sag down to a sitting position, his knees refusing to support him. No—it was the terrible, Godless, unbelievable *Things* that scurried around in the smooth rock hall that stretched away into the cavern.

Frozen with soul-chilling fear, Asher stared with eyes that bulged. What were they? Spawned neither of God nor Satan—what could they be? Black-skinned—or was it skin?—like rubber, with round bodies, like black basket balls inflated to triple size; bodies that seemed to ripple, distort, swell and contract with life within life.

Short, foot-long stems that must have been legs, ending in round balls that served as feet, no doubt. Tentacles, Asher would have called them, six feet in length, thick as mighty cables and dotted with suckers like the tentacles of an octopus. And heads—Asher gagged and vomited!

Not heads. Just masses of the black body substance as large as the two fists of a man. In each head was a

crooked black gash for a mouth. There were no eyes that Asher could see. Yet, these Things seemed to see one another, and emitted strange, chill, squeaking sounds!

As Asher watched, the Things sensed his presence. A half hundred of them rose and started toward him. They did not walk, nor did they crawl. Undulating, contorting strangely, they came on with incredible speed, long tentacles waving before them; slithering on the rocky floor of the cavern; making those odd squeaking noises.

As they neared him, Asher sprang to his feet, backing up against the pile of cavings beside the Miner. A long tentacle whipped out and wrapped around his leg. A short, snout-tentacle quivered toward his face. There was strength beyond imagining in the grip on him.

With an almost animal snarl the man from the earth's surface moved to protect himself from these creatures, surely of the lowest living order. He grabbed into the pocket of his loose asbestos composition suit, and his fingers closed comfortingly

around the static gun.

He aimed it, and the Thing gripping him was hurled back upon the others.



[Image description start. A black and white illustration, showing Asher, in a pressure suit, wielding a gun and firing it at one of the black,

tentacled shapes attacking him. Image description end.]

Crackling, snapping viciously, the charges of electricity that were drawn from the very earth increased in the gun and spumed out like lightning bolts. The Things squeaked excitedly and surged forward. Asher's finger pulled the ratchet trigger full force, and like dew before a strong shaft of sunlight, the gruesome Things were knocked away.

Hating the sight, Asher changed the charge of his gun, cutting the size of the path the volts covered, thereby increasing the potency of the discharge. The piled bodies sizzled, and to Asher's nose came a sulphurous smell. Then, there was nothing at all....

Sick, he put the gun back into the deep pocket and leaned on the wall. He turned around again to the pile of cavings that barred his way from the surface, and dug like a madman with his bare hands. The Miner was weighed down, and he could not use it anyhow. The blasting tubes were on the bottom, and could not be shifted to the top.

Suddenly he stopped his crazed work, raised his head and listened. "My God!" he gasped hoarsely, "am I stark mad?" He thought he must be, for the voice of a human being came to his ears.

"You will be pleased, Blaine Asher, to turn around! And do not make any foolish moves, I warn you."

"Lee Wong! Krenski!" Asher turned, face to face with the super-scientists of whom he had spoken to R. Briggs Johns the day before. Asher shook his head. More of the terrible dream, this meeting two humans down in the earth's core.

"Most right, honorable Asher." Lee Wong bowed mockingly. He and Krenski were garbed in loose-fitting garments of much the same style as Asher. In their hands, they carried static guns. Not the small gun, such as Asher had concealed in his pocket. More like heavy air drills, they were.

Asher frowned at the lamps they carried. He knew by the dazzling action of the rays that they were pressure lamps. But they gave off much better light

than those of his own invention. They had gone him one better there.

"Did—did you see them?" Asher gulped. "And how—how did you get down here? Tell me!" He took a step toward Lee Wong, intending to lay his hand on the Chinaman, to make sure he was live flesh and blood, and not a figment of his disordered brain.

"Stand where you are!" Lee Wong snapped. He held the heavy static gun up and Asher felt a light charge tingle his body. "Those Things of which you speak—I assume you mean the Petrolia. Ah, yes, we see them. Every day, we see them. For us they work. They work, my dear Blaine Asher, tapping upward into the oil sands; sands that are burial places of countless millions of generations of Petrolia; of lost races that once ruled supreme over these underground worlds.

"How simple, to take the oil from below—the oil you want so much above. Someone must do the work. I and Krenski found the Petrolia ready and willing. Being creatures of feeling, with little sense, we were able to bend their dying wills to do our work. You see,

we made them feel we would save them, a dying race, from extinction! They do our bidding."

Asher was bewildered by the enormity of the thing.

"You mean these Things you have called Petrolia actually work for you? And that you saved them from becoming extinct?"

"Exactly," Lee Wong nodded, seeming to be enjoying himself. "Like humans of the surface, Petrolia live on the dead. I mean, wherever we get our living food from the earth, we plant our dead back in that earth. Petrolia are spawned in beds of petroleum. Just as eels seek deep water to lay their eggs, so do Petrolia go to the oil strata to spawn future tribes.

"When we pump out the oil, they have no—shall we say "hatching?"—beds. But now, by tapping and bringing down the oil, we have assured them more spawning pits. They will increase, and we have made them sense it. For that matter, the very oil they breed in, gives them sustenance. That is why they are black fleshed and blooded, and have suckers instead of mouths, as a black man is black through ages beneath

hot suns.

"It's easy for us, who are wiser than other men, to figure what oilfield might contain such people. We have a rapid elevator connecting us to the surface. And—"

"Then," Asher almost shouted, "I'm not trapped!"

"No?" Lee Wong wrinkled his forehead quizzically. "You should realize that we cannot allow you to go back to the surface—alive, or any other way. We intend to increase the Petrolia, spreading them to other underground, yet uninhabited worlds. You would spoil that.

"No, you will never return to the surface. They cannot haul your tube to the top, so they will think you perished in it. And"—Lee Wong shrugged—"it might have been better if you had, Mr.—"

*"I wouldn't!"* the yellow man snarled. He rolled the ratchet of his static gun and Asher was hurled to the floor by the heavy shock. Wisely, he stood up, keeping

his hands well away from the pocket in which his own gun rested. He doubted whether his little static gun could compete with the guns of the others, but it was something. They had not thought to search him—perhaps they might not. It was his only hope.

Lee Wong bowed low again, motioning Asher to go ahead. "Now you shall see what we have done. We are proud, and we know you can appreciate our workings. You will be glad to learn why we do as we are doing; you will be intrigued as a fellow scientist. Then, so sad to say, you must perish for having gained that very knowledge."

Asher shrugged, and through half-closed lids he eyed Lee Wong and the rather small, slender Krenski, of the high brow and large head. Then he walked ahead of them. Head up, shoulders back, he walked carelessly down the wide hall—a hall that led into the main cavern of that underground empire.

It was large—fully a hundred feet in a rough square. Not fifteen feet from floor to ceiling at any point, it followed the course of the two layers of granite

between which it was sandwiched. Other long halls, or crevices, ran in every direction out of this main cavern. In the walls, in niches and cracks, the superior pressure lamps had been placed, throwing a bright, eery light over it all.

Asher recoiled suddenly at the sight of hundreds of Petrolia that swarmed the hallways, and they seemed to sense another presence beside that of Lee Wong or Krenski. A choked, gurgling sound came from the Chinaman, and they disappeared down the halls, squeaking angrily as they went.

"Our control room," explained Lee Wong waving his hand about him. He pointed to a dozen twenty-four inch pipe-lines that ran along the low ceiling, coming from as many different halls into the room, but all going out the same large hall, larger than the rest. "There are the arteries of our system. There is the oil that is so—shall we say strangely?—missing in your wells." He smiled, a taunting, mocking light in his eyes.

"You well understand how we do it. Above us, just

below the oil strata, is a steel, trough-shaped roof. The oil, tapped from below, drains into these, and then into these pipe-lines. If we were working from above, now, we would run it to a central shaft, and pump it out. We do not want it on the surface, however."

"Then why in the name of hell do you want it?" Asher barked, a tense note of anger in his voice. "And what do you do with it?" These two were humans. At least, they were in man-form, if not in feeling. And the Petrolia could be handled. Asher was getting mad, and his fear ebbed.

"Come." Lee Wong led the way under the pipe-lines, down the large hall. Krenski, his heavy static gun ready, walked at Asher's back. They came out into another cavern that stretched beyond the powerful lights. The sound of their voices echoed like thunder of the drums of Thor, and Asher realized this cavern might stretch away in Stygian blackness for hundreds of miles.

Asher marveled, for the floor of this cavern dropped

at least five feet below the level of the control room or incoming hallways, forming a natural reservoir. A reservoir for the big streams of oil that were pouring into it from the pipe-lines.

The rumble of the oil as it came in and splashed out in a never-ending stream, and the rumble of the oil streams above them as the precious fluid flowed down into the plated drain roof, sounded like the tramp of the weary feet of the damned, as it echoed back and forth across the mighty cavern.

"Our storage." Lee Wong stood at the edge and explained. "Also, as you may see, a concentration incubator, or spawning bed and food storage for our Petrolia."

Blaine Asher looked again at the rippling oil at his feet. He choked brokenly and stepped back a pace. For the oil near the bank was alive! It rippled and splashed, teeming with life. By the strange alchemy of breeding in oil and living on oil as man lives on bread, that lake of oil was a mass of growing Petrolia. Millions—yes, countless billions—of them! Hideous,

foul Things that would be turned loose with the rest in that nightmare world—that would be taken to other buried worlds to start new races.

"But why—why?" Asher almost screamed the words at Lee Wong.

"Petrolia will be our armies, protecting our underground wealth," Lee Wong answered him. "They will be our faithful workers, under no command but mine. For, even Krenski has not mastered the over-control it takes to handle them!"

"Gradually, as happened to the field we are now under, all oil fields will go dry. We will be getting the oil from below, and putting it in storage in mother earth. Think, Blaine Asher, what it will mean!" There was a fanatical light in Lee Wong's beady eyes.

"A world without petroleum is a world without power. No oil for fuel; no gasoline, lubricants or by-products of any sort. No airplanes could fly; tanks, tractors, oil-burning trains and ships; mechanical appliances—nothing could run. We now take the oil from America.

Later, when our Petrolia have increased and we have devised means of moving them, we will go to all oil-producing countries.

"We will secrete the oil and paralyze the world. Now, in Russia and China and India, our societies are organizing and growing. They will handle the weakened, powerless nations, and I shall be ruler of the universe, surface and beneath, with Krenski to aid me, you see. It is wonderful, is it not? And, knowing what you do, having seen what you have, could you call it impossible?"

Blaine Asher groaned. It was not impossible, he knew. Unreal; monstrous—but never impossible. A region of hideous Petrolia; a world stripped of automotive and mechanical power, its fuel held in the hands of a few, far underground—it was terrible to think of.

And Asher the only one who knew. The only one who could avert such a thing. The fate of an entire world was in his hands. And he would soon die.

Die? No! Blaine Asher swore silently to himself that

no power in existence should keep him from destroying these two fiends. It had to be done!

He dared not fail.

"Wonderful, stupendous thing," he forced himself to smile. "I'd like to grasp the hand of the genius who devised and carried out such a wonderful thing."

He took a step toward Lee Wong, right hand extended, his left slipping toward the pocket where his own static gun rested.

Lee Wong extended his own right hand. Something in the chill, flint look of Asher's eyes must have warned him. Even as Asher's fingers closed around his hand, he tried to jerk back.

"Destroy him!" he cried out to Krenski.

Asher dropped to one knee, letting his static gun remain in his pocket. His left hand closed around Lee Wong's wrist as the Oriental tried to pull away. Krenski was bringing the heavy, cylinderlike gun up

and aiming it at Asher.

Asher twisted on one knee, his teeth gritted, braced to receive the shock from the gun. He jerked Lee Wong's arm down, heaved and came to his feet. Crying out, arms and legs flailing, the Chinaman catapulted toward Krenski—and just at the instant Krenski fired!

The sickening smell of cindered flesh was in Asher's nostrils as he turned and ran back up the main hallway. He glanced back over his shoulder as he ran, and shuddered at the black mass lying at Krenski's feet. Lee Wong was no more. Wide-eyed, the Russian stared at the thing at his feet. Then, with a fiendish shriek, turned and brought the gun into line on the fleeing Asher.

A crackling charge of electricity singed the back of Asher's head as he dove head first around the corner of the hall into the control cavern. He reasoned that Krenski had sent a full charge after him, and hope kindled higher in his breast. For Asher believed his smaller static weapon was as strong as that of the

other. At that, it would be a test, and Asher dared not take chances.

He crouched in the door of another hallway, waiting. Cursing, Krenski dashed into the control cavern. Asher brought his gun up and fired. But even as he pulled the trigger, a long tentacle reached from the dark crevice behind him and jerked his arm. His charge snapped by the Russian, warning the other that Asher, too, was dealing with powerful electric rays that meant death should they touch.

Asher yielded to the tug of the slimy, sulphur-smelling tentacle, letting it pull him into the crevice, the charges of Krenski's weapon crackling by him, leaving his skin dry, and a powdery sensation in his mouth.

In the shelter of the crevice, Asher turned his gun upon the Petrolia that gripped him. The tentacles fell away, fading to nothingness before the charges that showed quivery blue in the dark. Like catacombs, one crevice opened into another. Asher darted into the next crevice and edged cautiously toward the control cavern.

The angry buzzing and snapping of Krenski's weapon caused him to duck instinctively, although no deadly charges came his way.

"Oh, God!" he heard the Russian's high-pitched voice, agonized, wailing, "they're coming in—they're coming in!"

A squeaking and slithering, now greater than ever, rose above all other sounds. And Asher realized what Krenski meant. Lee Wong had said that only he could control the Petrolia. They were swarming into the control room now. That was what Krenski was shooting at.

The squeaking sounds came up the crevice in which Asher was and a cold, clammy sweat broke out all over him. He could blast a thousand of them into nothing. But by sheer force, more body than his light static gun could down, they would overwhelm him.

His mind raced swiftly. He remembered the location, out in the control room, of the cage elevator that ran to the surface. It had not been hurt by the glycerine

blast that had trapped Asher. The elevator shaft from the control room was cased clear into the cavern floor, and the blast had not jarred this far.

He wheeled and sent another charge of static electricity into the crevice back of him, then lunged out into the control room. It would be his own weapon against Krenski's, and a chance to gain the bottom of the shaft.

Krenski—piled, charred heaps of the Petrolia around him, which had momentarily cleared the attack—was running across the control room. Like a seething wave, the foul Petrolia undulated from every crevice and hallway, coming in to fresh attack. The Russian, terror lending him speed, raced for the cage at the foot of the shaft that led to the surface. At the same time Asher ran out.

Nearly a hundred feet apart, on opposite sides of the cavern, they stopped. Krenski turned his heavy weapon toward Asher at the same time Asher sent his own gun crackling and snapping out blue, fiery flame.

Side-stepping, now crouching, now dodging to this side and that, they fought their strange duel. Asher's right arm was burned, his hair singed from his head, and his body jarred again and again as Krenski touched him. Krenski, groaning through gritted teeth, suffered burns all over his chest and left leg.

As the Petrolia came on, and the lightning play of deadly electric charges continued, Asher made a discovery. He noticed that the rays, or charges, of the two guns, when they met in mid-air, caused blue flame, and that the charge went no farther.

It did it again. The two charges met, crackled to explosion in the air. Krenski, too, noticed it, and he also noticed that the Petrolia were almost upon them again. Coming on in a wave that could not be hurled back.

He looked at Asher, and met the dare in Asher's eyes. Straight at each other, neither moving, they shot their static charges. Neither would move: it was a challenge from Asher that Krenski had to meet. One of them would have to die before the other would be

able to gain the cage in the shaft. There could be no compromise, and only one man at a time could go surfaceward. If they continued to dodge and fight, the Petrolia would overwhelm them.

Power against power, they fought it out.

Asher's finger tightened on his trigger release until it seemed the skin would split; then he caused his hand to tremble just enough to make his electric charges cover the space in which Krenski's charges traveled. Hissing, spitting, flashing explosions, giving off sounds and light like big explosions of flash powder, the charges met.

Asher tingled from head to foot, and thrilled to the very marvel of the thing. Two deadly beams of electricity, holding each other off!

In one long, continuous flash, the contact point of the charges began to shift. Closer and closer, as the force of superior charges cleaved through the other, the contact points neared Krenski. He saw death upon him, for in another instant, Asher's charges would

hurl his own bolts back upon him. The smaller weapon of Blaine Asher, attracting more static electric currents by reason of having a small attracting battery inside, where the larger gun of the other depended upon magnets for attraction, was triumphing.

Krenski's mustache and light beard singed and curled. He cried out, stepped back, throwing up his arms as death flashed through his body.

His gun playing about him, Asher raced toward the big valves and gates that shut off the drain of the pipe-lines. Burning, reeking of sulphur and burned leather, the Petrolia vanished before him. But, as he turned, the drainage system that was robbing the field shut off. They had blocked his way again!

Too many to blast away altogether, they pressed in. Asher leaped forward, feet kicking, left fist smashing out, static gun crackling as if to tell him that nothing could stop them. Tentacles gripped at him, the foul, stinking smell gagged him. But the squeaks of the Petrolia maddened him.

"Squeak, damn you!" Asher shouted wildly, kicking, shooting and hitting, gaining toward the shaft.

"Squeak—for all the damned Things that ever bred below the earth cannot stop one surface man!"

He burned and fought his way through and jumped into the cage as his gun electrocuted two of the Petrolia that tried to weave in after him. As he slammed the door, Asher was conscious that something was happening. He hesitated, just long enough to see the cavern start buckling and caving. The pressure of the oil, now shut off, was filling back toward the surface, creating a mighty pressure downward. The surface wells would produce man's power-fuel once more.

Asher slammed the door, turned on the power, and the cage shot upward.

A half hour later, those waiting on the floor of the derrick above the hole in which Asher had gone down, started. Asher, burned, wounded, blood streaming from his battered body, staggered in and collapsed at their feet.

"I can't believe it! Insane! Impossible! Yet, every well in this field has started producing again! And when we went to that old, abandoned wildcat well, we found the shaft opening! I had it covered up, as you ordered."

R. Briggs Johns paced up and down the laboratory floor, talking to Asher, who had just arisen from his bed, two weeks after he had collapsed at their feet in the derrick. Still bandaged, he was a different Blaine Asher. His face was lined, and the hair next to his scalp nearly snow white.

"I'll be able to do some walking around outside in a few days," Asher declared as he cleaned a test tube and placed it in a rack. "I can locate several wells over that underground storage cavern, and you can recover that oil. But you can't mine this field.

"Twenty years, perhaps, and you can. But it will take that long for those Petrolia to die out. We've got to get the oil out from below to a point where they can no longer spawn. We will apply mining in other fields—but not here!"

"Not here," Johns repeated, shuddering.

"It's up to you to see no one else tries it." Asher lit a cigarette and nodded at Johns. "Get control of the field—anything. Tell the oil men something. But don't tell them the truth. They wouldn't believe you. They would call you raving mad.

"The world does not know. It would not believe. Can we do other than remain silent?"

R. Briggs Johns, sick of thinking of the cavern world and horrible things below them, knew they could not.